SŪRAH 51

Al-Dhāriyāt

(The Scattering Winds)

Prologue

This *sūrah* has a special character. It begins by mentioning four forces that work by God's command, using ambiguous terms which give us an initial impression that we are being introduced to things wrapped in secrecy. God Almighty makes an oath by these four forces to emphasize a certain matter: "*By those that scatter far and wide; by those that are heavily laden; by those that speed along with gentle ease; by those that distribute by command; that which you are promised is true indeed, and, for certain, judgement is bound to come.*" (Verses 1–6)

The words used in this opening for those four forces mentioned in the oath, i.e. *al-dhāriyāt, al-ḥāmilāt, al-jāriyāt* and *al-muqassimāt*, are not usually used to refer to immediately recognized objects. They invite questions and requests for explanation. Indeed, their very sounds impart this feeling of ambiguity, which is perhaps intended so as to give the *sūrah* its particular aura.

The first oath is hardly stated when it is followed by a second. God states this oath "*By the sky and its starry pathways you people are at variance in what you say.*" (Verses 7–8) What you say is inconsistent, based on conjecture, not fact.

With this particular opening and by its general drift, the *sūrah* sets itself a particular objective, which is the establishment of a bond between

the human heart and the sky, or rather what lies beyond the reach of human perception and known only to God. The human heart will thus become free of the constraints of this world, unchained by anything that prevents it from being dedicated to God's service. It will then be ready to move unhindered towards Him: "*Flee, then, to God.*" (Verse 50) This would fulfil God's purpose of creation: "*I have not created the* jinn *and mankind for any end other than they may worship Me.*" (Verse 56)

Since preoccupation with one's livelihood and what the future may bring with regard to it is one of the hardest of these hindrances, the *sūrah* takes particular care to free man of it, and to reassure him so that his heart turns to God, free of earthly chains. References to this point are found in several places in the *sūrah*. For example, explicit references include: "*And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised.*" (Verse 22) and "*God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty.*" (Verse 58) Other references are implicit, as in the verse describing the attitude of the righteous towards money. They "*would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.*" (Verse 19) Likewise, the *sūrah* describes Abraham's hospitality and the welcome he gave to his guests, or rather the angels he thought to be his guests. When they greeted him, he went straight to his household and brought a fat calf, yet prior to their arrival at his doorstep, they were total strangers to him.

It is all, then, about freeing one's mind from the shackles of life on earth and earning one's living, so that one looks up to heaven, yearning for its bliss, eager to earn God's pleasure and seeking His acceptance. This is the focus of all the issues the *sūrah* raises. This explains the reason for its rather ambiguous start followed by an oath by the sky and the subsequent references made to it.

Thus we see in the picture the *sūrah* draws early on the main characteristics of those who are God-fearing: dedication to God, worship at night, sacrifice of money, assigning a portion of it to the poor and the deprived: "*The God-fearing will be amid gardens and springs. They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them; for they were keen to do good. They would sleep but little at night, and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn, and would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.*" (Verses 15–19)

To achieve the same purpose, the *sūrah* directs our attentions to God's signs on earth and within ourselves, while also emphasizing that provisions are given by heaven. We must not, therefore, give undue importance to its immediate means on earth: "*On earth there are signs for those with sure faith, and in yourselves too: can you not see? And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised.*" (Verses 20–22)

The same may be said about the reference to the building of the skies with ample space, while the earth has been made easy for people to traverse, and to the fact that all creatures are created in pairs. All this leads to the all-important advice that we should all turn to God paying full heed to the warnings given by His Messenger: "*We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse; and We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it! All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought. Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning.*" (Verses 47–50)

The *sūrah* concludes with a statement reiterating the same message, making clear the purpose of creating humans and *jinn*, and their major roles in life: "*I have not created the* jinn *and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me. No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty.*" (Verses 56–58)

Thus the *sūrah* plays on the same theme throughout, using different tunes but maintaining the same beat, directing man's heart to look to the sky.

The *sūrah* includes quick references to the stories of Abraham, Lot, Moses, the ʿĀd, the Thamūd and Noah's people. In its account of Abraham, the *sūrah* makes a quick reference to money, as well as the realm beyond our perception when he is given the happy news of the birth of a son to be endowed with knowledge. He and his wife are given this child when they could have never expected it. In the other stories, the reference is mainly to the fact that God's promise always comes true, just as it is emphatically stated at the beginning: "*That which you are promised is true indeed.*" (Verse 5) Another reference to this is made at the conclusion, where the unbelievers are issued with a clear warning: "*The wrongdoers shall have their share [of evil] like their predecessors. Let them not ask Me to hasten it.*" (Verse 59) This comes after the statement that

implies that generations of unbelievers seem to have recommended to each other that they reject God's messengers: "*Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' Have they, perchance, handed down this legacy to one another? No! They are people who transgress all bounds.*" (Verses 52–53)

Thus the historical accounts in the *sūrah* are closely related to its main theme, namely, pure and complete heart devotion to God, freeing it from all hindrances, strengthening its bond with heaven, first by faith and then by removing obstacles that prevent man from flying to that open horizon.

Al-Dhāriyāt
(The Scattering Winds)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

By the winds that scatter far and wide; (1)

وَالذَّارِيَاتِ ذَرْوًا ﴿١﴾

by those [clouds] that are heavily laden; (2)

فَالْحَامِلَاتِ وِقْرًا ﴿٢﴾

by those that speed along with gentle ease; (3)

فَالْجَارِيَاتِ يُسْرًا ﴿٣﴾

by those that distribute by command; (4)

فَالْمُقَسِّمَاتِ أَمْرًا ﴿٤﴾

that which you are promised is true indeed, (5)

إِنَّمَا تُوعَدُونَ لَصَادِقٌ ﴿٥﴾

and, for certain, judgement is bound to come. (6)

وَإِنَّ الدِّينَ لَوَاقِعٌ ﴿٦﴾

By the sky and its starry pathways (7)

وَالسَّمَاءِ ذَاتِ الْحُبُكِ ﴿٧﴾

you people are at variance in what you say, (8)

إِنَّكُمْ لَفِي قَوْلٍ مُخْتَلِفٍ ﴿٨﴾

abandoned by whoever wishes to turn away. (9)

يُؤْفَكُ عَنْهُ مَنْ أُفِكَ ﴿٩﴾

Perish the ones given to blind guessing (10)

قُتِلَ الْخَرَّاصُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

who are steeped in error, heedless of the truth. (11)

الَّذِينَ هُمْ فِي غَمْرَةٍ سَاهُونَ ﴿١١﴾

They ask: 'When will this Day of Judgement come?' (12)

يَسْأَلُونَ أَيَّانَ يَوْمُ الدِّينِ ﴿١٢﴾

That will be a day when they will be sorely tried by the fire. (13)

يَوْمَ هُمْ عَلَى النَّارِ يُفْتَنُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

Taste this your trial! This is what you were keen to hasten. (14)

ذُوقُوا فِتْنَتَكُمْ هَٰذَا الَّذِي كُنتُم بِهِ تَسْتَعْجِلُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

The God-fearing will be amid gardens and springs. (15)

إِنَّ الْمُتَّقِينَ فِي جَنَّاتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿١٥﴾

They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them; for they were keen to do good. (16)

آخِذِينَ مَا آتَاهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ ۚ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا قَبْلَ ذَٰلِكَ مُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

They would sleep but little at night, (17)

كَانُوا قَلِيلًا مِّنَ اللَّيْلِ مَا يَهْجَعُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn, (18)

وَبِالْأَسْحَارِ هُمْ يَسْتَغْفِرُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

and would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived. (19)

وَفِي أَمْوَالِهِمْ حَقٌّ لِّلسَّائِلِ وَالْمَحْرُومِ ﴿١٩﴾

On earth there are signs for those with sure faith, (20)

وَفِي ٱلْأَرْضِ ءَايَٰتٌ لِّلْمُوقِنِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

and in yourselves too: can you not see? (21)

وَفِىٓ أَنفُسِكُمْ ۚ أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised. (22)

وَفِى ٱلسَّمَآءِ رِزْقُكُمْ وَمَا تُوعَدُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, all this is the very truth, just as true as you are endowed with speech. (23)

فَوَرَبِّ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ إِنَّهُۥ لَحَقٌّ مِّثْلَ مَآ أَنَّكُمْ تَنطِقُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

Have you heard the story of Abraham's honoured guests? (24)

هَلْ أَتَىٰكَ حَدِيثُ ضَيْفِ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ ٱلْمُكْرَمِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

They went in to see him and bade him peace. He answered, 'Peace,' [and added to himself] 'These are strangers.' (25)

إِذْ دَخَلُوا۟ عَلَيْهِ فَقَالُوا۟ سَلَٰمًا ۖ قَالَ سَلَٰمٌ قَوْمٌ مُّنكَرُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

He turned quickly to his household and brought out a fat calf. (26)

فَرَاغَ إِلَىٰٓ أَهْلِهِۦ فَجَآءَ بِعِجْلٍ سَمِينٍ ﴿٢٦﴾

He placed it before them, saying: 'Will you not eat?' (27)

فَقَرَّبَهُۥٓ إِلَيْهِمْ قَالَ أَلَا تَأْكُلُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

فَأَوْجَسَ مِنْهُمْ خِيفَةً ۖ قَالُوا لَا تَخَفْ ۖ وَبَشَّرُوهُ بِغُلَامٍ عَلِيمٍ ﴿٢٨﴾

He then became apprehensive of them, but they said: 'Do not be afraid.' They gave him the good news of [the birth of] a son who would be endowed with knowledge. (28)

فَأَقْبَلَتِ امْرَأَتُهُ فِي صَرَّةٍ فَصَكَّتْ وَجْهَهَا وَقَالَتْ عَجُوزٌ عَقِيمٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

His wife then came in with a loud cry, struck her face, and said: 'A barren old woman!' (29)

قَالُوا كَذَٰلِكِ قَالَ رَبُّكِ ۖ إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْحَكِيمُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٣٠﴾

Replied they: 'Thus will it be. This is what your Lord said. He is the Wise, the All-Knowing.' (30)

قَالَ فَمَا خَطْبُكُمْ أَيُّهَا الْمُرْسَلُونَ ﴿٣١﴾

Said Abraham: 'What is your errand, messengers?' (31)

قَالُوا إِنَّا أُرْسِلْنَا إِلَىٰ قَوْمٍ مُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

They replied: 'We have been sent to a people lost in sin, (32)

لِنُرْسِلَ عَلَيْهِمْ حِجَارَةً مِنْ طِينٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

to bring down on them stones of clay, (33)

مُسَوَّمَةً عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ لِلْمُسْرِفِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

marked as from your Lord for those who transgressed all bounds. (34)

فَأَخْرَجْنَا مَنْ كَانَ فِيهَا مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

We brought out such believers as were there; (35)

فَمَا وَجَدْنَا فِيهَا غَيْرَ بَيْتٍ مِنَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

but We did not find there any who had surrendered themselves to Us apart from a single house. (36)

We left there a sign for those who fear the grievous suffering. (37)

وَتَرَكْنَا فِيهَآ ءَايَةً لِّلَّذِينَ يَخَافُونَ ٱلْعَذَابَ ٱلْأَلِيمَ ﴿٣٧﴾

In Moses, too, there is a sign: We sent him to Pharaoh with clear authority; (38)

وَفِى مُوسَىٰٓ إِذْ أَرْسَلْنَٰهُ إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ بِسُلْطَٰنٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

but Pharaoh turned away in the pride of his power and said [of Moses]: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' (39)

فَتَوَلَّىٰ بِرُكْنِهِۦ وَقَالَ سَٰحِرٌ أَوْ مَجْنُونٌ ﴿٣٩﴾

We seized him and his hosts, and cast them all into the sea: he was the one to blame. (40)

فَأَخَذْنَٰهُ وَجُنُودَهُۥ فَنَبَذْنَٰهُمْ فِى ٱلْيَمِّ وَهُوَ مُلِيمٌ ﴿٤٠﴾

In the 'Ād there is another sign: We let loose against them a life-destroying wind (41)

وَفِى عَادٍ إِذْ أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلرِّيحَ ٱلْعَقِيمَ ﴿٤١﴾

which reduced to dust everything it came upon. (42)

مَا تَذَرُ مِن شَىْءٍ أَتَتْ عَلَيْهِ إِلَّا جَعَلَتْهُ كَٱلرَّمِيمِ ﴿٤٢﴾

And in Thamūd, too, when they were told: 'You can enjoy your life for a while,' (43)

وَفِى ثَمُودَ إِذْ قِيلَ لَهُمْ تَمَتَّعُوا۟ حَتَّىٰ حِينٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

but they insolently defied their Lord's commandment. So, the thunderbolt struck them while they were helplessly looking on. (44)

فَعَتَوْا عَنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّهِمْ فَأَخَذَتْهُمُ الصَّٰعِقَةُ وَهُمْ يَنظُرُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

They were unable even to rise; nor could they defend themselves. (45)

فَمَا اسْتَطَاعُوا مِن قِيَامٍ وَمَا كَانُوا مُنتَصِرِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

And the people of Noah before them: they too were people lost in evil. (46)

وَقَوْمَ نُوحٍ مِّن قَبْلُ ۖ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا قَوْمًا فَٰسِقِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse; (47)

وَالسَّمَاءَ بَنَيْنَاهَا بِأَيْيْدٍ وَإِنَّا لَمُوسِعُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

and We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it! (48)

وَالْأَرْضَ فَرَشْنَاهَا فَنِعْمَ الْمَٰهِدُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought. (49)

وَمِن كُلِّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقْنَا زَوْجَيْنِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning; (50)

فَفِرُّوا إِلَى اللَّهِ ۖ إِنِّي لَكُم مِّنْهُ نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٥٠﴾

and do not associate partners with Him: I am sent by Him to give you clear warning! (51)

وَلَا تَجْعَلُوا مَعَ اللَّهِ إِلَٰهًا آخَرَ ۖ إِنِّي لَكُم مِّنْهُ نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٥١﴾

كَذَٰلِكَ مَآ أَتَى ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِم مِّن
رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا قَالُوا۟ سَاحِرٌ أَوْ مَجْنُونٌ ﴿٥٢﴾

Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' (52)

أَتَوَاصَوْا۟ بِهِۦ ۚ بَلْ هُمْ قَوْمٌ طَاغُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

Have they, perchance, handed down this legacy to one another? No! They are people who transgress all bounds. (53)

فَتَوَلَّ عَنْهُمْ فَمَآ أَنتَ بِمَلُومٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

Turn, then, away from them: you shall incur no blame; (54)

وَذَكِّرْ فَإِنَّ ٱلذِّكْرَىٰ تَنفَعُ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

and go on reminding all. Such a reminder will benefit those who believe. (55)

وَمَا خَلَقْتُ ٱلْجِنَّ وَٱلْإِنسَ
إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ ﴿٥٦﴾

I have not created the *jinn* and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me. (56)

مَآ أُرِيدُ مِنْهُم مِّن رِّزْقٍ وَمَآ أُرِيدُ أَن
يُطْعِمُونِ ﴿٥٧﴾

No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. (57)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلرَّزَّاقُ ذُو ٱلْقُوَّةِ ٱلْمَتِينُ ﴿٥٨﴾

God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty. (58)

فَإِنَّ لِلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا۟ ذَنُوبًا مِّثْلَ ذَنُوبِ
أَصْحَٰبِهِمْ فَلَا يَسْتَعْجِلُونِ ﴿٥٩﴾

The wrongdoers shall have their share [of evil] like their predecessors. Let them not ask Me to hasten it. (59)

Woe betide the unbelievers on the day they have been promised. (60)

فَوَيْلٌ لِّلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِن يَوْمِهِمُ الَّذِي يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾

A True Promise

By those that scatter far and wide; By those that are heavily laden; By those that speed along with gentle ease; By those that distribute by command; That which you are promised is true indeed, and, for certain, judgement is bound to come. (Verses 1–6)

The *sūrah* begins with a quick beat, using ambiguous phrases to imply that it is talking about a serious matter that deserves our full attention. Inevitably though, the four ambiguous words used in the first four verses – *al-dhāriyāt, al-ḥāmilāt, al-jāriyāt* and *al-muqassimāt* – have made people ask questions, even in the very early days of Islam, as they sought further explanation. In this respect, Ibn Kathīr reports:

> 'Alī was on the pulpit in Kufah one day when he said: 'If you have any query about a verse in the Qur'ān or a ḥadīth by the Prophet, I will give you an answer.' Ibn al-Kawwā' asked him the meaning of *al-dhāriyāt*, [those that scatter], and he answered, 'the winds'. Then he said: 'What about *al-ḥāmilāt* [those heavily laden]?' 'Alī answered, 'the clouds'. The man then asked about *al-jāriyāt* [those that speed along], and 'Alī's answer was, 'the ships'. The man asked: 'What about *al-muqassimāt* [those that distribute]?' 'Alī said, 'the angels'.[1]

Ṣabīgh ibn 'Isl al-Tamīmī asked 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb about these words and his reply was the same as above. 'Umar felt, however, that al-Tamīmī was asking only for argument's sake, thereby hinting at the ambiguity. By way of reprimand for his behaviour, 'Umar banned him from future social gatherings. Subsequently, Ṣabīgh al-Tamīmī repented

1. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*, Dār el-Ma'rifah, Beirut, 1987, Vol. 4, p. 248.

and swore most seriously that he no longer entertained any of his earlier doubts. This report suggests that the ambiguity contained in these words encouraged those who tried to raise doubts about the Qur'ān, making such words the point of their questioning. The same explanation of these words was given by Ibn 'Abbās, Ibn 'Umar, Mujāhid, Sa'īd ibn Jubayr, al-Ḥasan, Qatādah, al-Suddī and many others.

God states an oath by the winds that move and scatter things such as dust, grain, pollen, clouds and other material known or unknown to us; by the clouds carrying water and driven by God Almighty to wherever He pleases; by the ships that easily float on water making use of the characteristics God has given to water, shipping and the whole universe, and by the angels carrying God's commands and delivering them as He pleases, giving details as to what matters they are concerned with.

The winds, the clouds, the ships and the angels are all God's creatures which He uses as a means to implement His will with regard to the universe and His servants. By using them in His oath, He draws attention to them and what they signify. In this way we are able to reflect on how God initiates these creatures, sets them in operation and uses them to fulfil what He wishes to be fulfilled. Mentioning them in this way invites our minds to think about the secrets they embody so that we look to their Creator. They may also, in some way, relate to the issue of sustenance, preoccupation with which the *sūrah* wants to free us from. The winds, the clouds and the ships have a definite connection with sustenance. Moreover, sustenance is one of the things that the angels distribute by God's command. Thus, we clearly see the relation between this opening and one of the main topics of the *sūrah*.

God states an oath by these four types of creation, confirming that "*that which you are promised is true indeed, and, for certain, judgement is bound to come.*" (Verses 5–6) God has promised mankind that He will reward their good actions with what is better, and that He will requite their bad deeds with what is bad. If He delays holding them to account during their lives on earth, He will not ignore doing so in the life to come, where all reckoning and accounting will inevitably take place: "*For certain, judgement is bound to come.*" (Verse 6) The promise is undoubtedly true, and will be fulfilled in either life. He has also

promised people that their sustenance, in plenty or limited measure, is guaranteed. Again His promise in this matter is true.

God's promise to mankind is sure to be realized in the way and at the time He chooses. This needs no oath from Him. However, He makes this oath by these four types of His creation to draw attention to them, as they clearly point to His power and planning. When we contemplate these entities we have a clearer impression of the truth of God's promise and, therefore, our accountability for our deeds will inevitably take place. By their very nature, these entities suggest that life is not the result of idle play, accident or blind coincidence. Indeed, the oath leads us to view them as proofs of the divine message.

Differences and Blind Guessing

The same may be said about the second oath: "*By the sky and its starry pathways you people are at variance in what you say, abandoned by whoever wishes to turn away.*" (Verses 7–9) This oath is by the sky that is perfectly built, with pathways that are carefully interconnected, like the links of a chain. This may be one form clouds take as they gather in the sky, looking like a watery or sandy surface during or after a windy period. On the other hand, this description may be true of the permanent order of orbits that are perfectly coordinated and probably interconnected.

This oath, by the perfectly arranged sky, confirms that the unbelievers are at variance in what they say and believe. Their stand is shaky, lacking roots and foundations. People may abandon belief at will, or stick to it if they wish. There is no general agreement or coordination as to its validity. The situation is one of perpetual confusion and worry. Such is falsehood: shifting grounds and a maze without markings or light. It is always shifting like a desert sand, lacking firm basis and accurate measure. When people agree on some aspect of faith, they soon diverge and find themselves in dispute. Their confusion is seen even more clearly when it is shown against the background of the sky, which is perfectly ordered and coordinated.

The *sūrah* goes on to state that the unbelievers are deluded about the major question of the life to come. Their opinions are without a firm or true basis. They argue and dispute about a clear question of truth.

It then goes on to portray the Day of Judgement in such a way as they can actually see it:

> *Perish the ones given to blind guessing who are steeped in error, heedless of the truth. They ask: 'When will this Day of Judgement come?' That will be a day when they will be sorely tried by the fire. Taste this your trial! This is what you were keen to hasten.* (Verses 10–14)

Such people indulge in blind guessing. It is God who invokes their killing. How terrible! Needless to say, such an invocation is a firm sentence, one that is certain to be enforced. "*Perish the ones given to blind guessing.*" (Verse (10) Further clarification of their identity is added: "*who are steeped in error, heedless of the truth.*" (Verse 11) They are so steeped in delusion and falsehood that they are unable to wake themselves up. The *sūrah* shows them to be totally unaware of anything around them, as if they are excessively drunk. They cannot see for themselves something that is very clear to anyone with a sound mind. "*They ask: When will this Day of Judgement come?*" (Verse 12) It is not a question that seeks information; rather, it is an expression of doubt and denial. Therefore, the *sūrah* shows them their position on that day which they claim to be highly improbable: "*That will be a day when they will be sorely tried by the fire.*" (Verse 13) They will burn in the fire just as some metals are exposed to fire to determine their make up. This burning is coupled with strong remonstration: "*Taste this your trial! This is what you were keen to hasten.*" (Verse 14) A quick scene showing their miserable end is the most fitting answer to their question that sought no information. This powerful scene of their end contrasts with the state of confusion that plagues their lives. Moreover, it confirms that God's invocation of their deaths is fulfilled in a most terrible way.

At the Opposite End

Next, a contrasting image is drawn. This depicts a different group, reassured in their certainty, eager to do what is good without boasting about it, fully awake at night when they volunteer their night worship:

> *The God-fearing will be amid gardens and springs. They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them; for they were keen to do good. They would sleep but little at night, and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn, and would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.* (Verses 15–19)

This group are fully alert, sensitive to the fact that God watches them and, therefore, they carefully watch their own behaviour. These will be placed "*amid gardens and springs. They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them.*" (Verses 15–16) God grants them blessings in abundance as a reward for what they do in this their first life, worshipping Him as if they see Him and realizing that He sees them: "*for they were keen to do good.*" (Verse 16) Their desire to excel is portrayed in a splendid image: "*They would sleep but little at night, and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn,*" (Verses 17–18) They are the ones who stay up at night when others are fast asleep. They turn to their Lord, appealing to Him to forgive them their sins. They sleep but little during the night, preferring to address their Lord and enjoy the pleasure of being in close contact with Him, when no one else is aware of that contact.

Al-Ḥasan says in commenting on the verse, "*They would sleep but little at night*": "They offered voluntary night worship, sleeping only a little and extending their worship until the late hours, shortly before dawn, when they would pray for forgiveness." Qatādah quotes al-Aḥnaf ibn Qays's comment after reading this verse: "They slept only for a short while at night. I am not one to which this verse applies." Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī cites al-Aḥnaf ibn Qays's comment: "I tried to compare my work to that of the people of heaven and I discovered that those people are ahead of us by a long way. We cannot aspire to what they achieved, sleeping but little at night. I then tried to compare my work to that of the people of hell and I found out that those are devoid of goodness, denying God's revelations and His messengers, refusing to believe in resurrection after death. I concluded that the best among us are those who mix good deeds with bad ones."

A man said to Zayd ibn Aslam that he felt that this quality of spending much of the night in voluntary worship does not apply to their

generation who only spend a little of the night time in such worship. Zayd said to him: "Blessed is the one who sleeps when he is sleepy and remains God-fearing when awake."

This is a standard to which a number of the *Tābi'īn* generation that immediately followed the Prophet's Companions, known for their firm belief and piety, aspired to. They felt that they were well below it. It is the standard only achieved by the elite God has chosen and who have been shown the way to achieve it.

This is their situation with regard to their relations with God. As for their relations with people and their attitude to money, these people are of the type that is keen to do good: they "*would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.*" (Verse 19) They not only give a share of what they have to those who ask for help and the one who is too shy to ask and thus remains deprived of help, but they make that a rightful share, committing themselves to it as though they are duty bound to do so even though it is voluntary.

This point fits well with the treatment of the issue of possessions and earnings in the *sūrah*, as it helps to free the believer's heart of the shackles of personal greed and their preoccupation with livelihood. It also serves to prepare us for the next section of the *sūrah*.

Signs Galore

> *On earth there are signs for those with sure faith, and in yourselves too: can you not see? And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised. By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, all this is the very truth, just as true as you are endowed with speech.* (Verses 20–23)

These verses turn our attentions to the countless signs testifying to God's oneness, both on earth and within ourselves. They also guide us to look to heaven for our means of sustenance, as it is all measured. They finish with a great oath by God Himself, the Lord of the heavens and earth, confirming that the message given to them from Him is absolutely true.

"On earth there are signs for those with sure faith, and in yourselves too: can you not see?" (Verses 20–21) The earth on which we live is a great exhibition of God's signs and marvels. Until now, mankind has only been able to see a little of these marvels, even though we discover each day something new and remarkable. Likewise, there is a similarly breathtaking exhibition that takes place within us, within the human soul with its marvellous secrets that mirror those of the universe. These two short verses refer to these two great exhibitions, opening their gates wide for anyone who wishes to look and have faith. Such a person will, as a result, fill his life with pleasure and enjoyment, profound lessons and a wealth of true knowledge.

Qur'ānic texts are phrased in such a way as to make them relevant for all times, environments and situations. They can give every person, every mind and every understanding a wealth of knowledge that each is perfectly able to handle. As man's knowledge increases, his faculties of understanding develop, his experience broadens, and as he becomes more aware of the secrets of the universe and of his own self, he receives more of the import of the Qur'ānic texts. As the Prophet declares: "the Qur'ān is a book of endless marvels. It remains new no matter how repeatedly it is read." The Prophet who said this was the man on whom the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high and who understood its secrets and lived them fully. His description was based on the most direct and personal of experiences.

Those who were the first to listen to the Qur'ān saw of God's signs on earth and in themselves their share, according to their knowledge, experience and inspiration. Every succeeding generation also received their shares according to whatever further knowledge and experience they had accumulated. We, in our turn, have our own share in line with our increased knowledge in different fields, and with what we have been able to discover of the secrets of the universe. Those who come after us will also find a share kept for them of secrets yet unknown to man, in both the earth and within the human soul. These two exhibitions will remain, to the end of time, majestic, full of new wonders.

This planet earth was made ready to support life in a way that is almost unique in what we know of this great universe, with its unlimited number of planets and stars. What we know of these, which is only a

fraction of what we do not know, includes millions of galaxies, each of which contains hundreds of millions of stars, as well as planets, which are satellites of these stars. Yet out of such countless numbers, the earth uniquely seems to be the only one suited for this type of life. Should any of the many special characteristics of the earth change or be disturbed, life as we know it will become impossible on earth. If the earth's size changes so that it becomes larger or smaller, or if a change affects the position of the earth in relation to the sun, or the sun's size or level of heat, or the angle of the earth's axis, or its rotation in place, or the speed of its movement in its orbit, or the size of the moon, or its distance from it, or the proportion of sea to dry land, etc. no life on earth would be possible. Is this not a great sign, or a multitude of signs, for us to contemplate?

Consider also the endless variety of foods stored in the earth for all creatures that live on it, fly in its atmosphere, swim its waters, hide in its caves, and who disappear underground. Some types of food are simple, others are complex and sophisticated. They are available in all types and shapes to meet the endless needs of endless numbers and types of creatures. Such a great variety of food, including what may be inside the earth, or in its atmosphere, or growing on its surface, or may come from the sun or other worlds beyond, is given in due measure and proportion in accordance with the divine will that created the earth and made it a cradle for this type of life, equipping it with all that is needed.

Consider further the scenes of what the earth presents, wherever you look or move. There are no end of wonderful scenes: flat grounds and lowlands, hills and valleys, lakes and seas, rivers and streams, vineyards and fields of grains and date-palms of different varieties, etc. Every one of these scenes undergoes change by the creative hand whose inventiveness never stops. We pass by any of these in the dry season and capture a certain essence of it, and then we pass by again in the rainy season to find a totally different essence. It presents a third image at the time of growth and yet another totally different one at harvest time. Yet it is all in the same spot, unable to move an inch.

Then consider the creatures that live on earth: plants, animals, birds, fish, reptiles and insects. We need not mention mankind because the *sūrah* gives it special focus. We cannot give a figure for the number of

kinds and species of these creatures, let alone give accurate figures of their individual populations. Every kind is a community of its own; each individual is a great wonder: every animal, bird, reptile, worm and shoot. Indeed, the wonder extends further to every petal of a flower and every stalk in a leaf. Each presents a great exhibition with endless marvels. In this way, the *sūrah* alerts human minds to reflect and contemplate so that they appreciate and enjoy these wonders throughout their lives' journey.

Yet none truly appreciates these wonders and enjoys these pleasures except one whose heart carries the certainty of faith: "*On earth there are signs for those with sure faith.*" (Verse 20) It is only such certainty that brings the heart alive so that it sees, understands and appreciates the creating power behind them. Without such certainty, all remains cold and hollow, speechless and lifeless, while the heart remains unresponsive. Many are those who pass through this great open exhibition with closed eyes and hearts. They neither feel its life force nor understand its language, and all because they are devoid of that certainty of faith. Some may be reputable scientists, but "*they only know the outer surface of this world's life.*" (30: 7) The truth beyond the outer surface remains closed to them, because hearts can only open to receive the truth of existence by the key of faith and can only see it in the light of certainty.

Man: A World of Wonders

The other wonder that walks on earth is mentioned in the next verse: "*And in yourselves too: can you not see?*" (Verse 21) Man is indeed the greatest wonder, or miracle on earth, although he is often oblivious to his own real status and to the secret wonders in his own constitution. He is a great wonder in his outer and inner self; his body and soul. When man begins to think about himself, he always finds some great wonder to contemplate: the way his organs are made, their distribution in his body, their functions and the way they perform those functions; how food is digested and assimilated; the process of breathing; blood circulation; the neurological system; the glands and what they produce to ensure physical growth and keep the body functioning, as also the perfect coordination,

harmony and cooperation between all these systems. Every wonderful aspect encompasses many other wonders. Indeed, in every organ and part of an organ there is an amazing wonder.

Then there are the secrets of man's soul and its known and unknown abilities: how he understands, retains and retrieves information. Where are information and images stored and how? How and where are such images, scenes and visions printed, and how are they retrieved? In all this, we are speaking about abilities known to us. What is unknown is even greater. We see occasional glimpses of these during moments of great inspiration, pointing to what is beyond our current reach.

Consider also the bewildering nature of human procreation: one cell carries the entire treasure of characteristics of the human race, as well as the special characteristics of both parents and nearer grandparents. Where are all these characteristics stored within the single microscopic cell? How does it recognize, by itself, its long history and represent it so accurately, eventually culminating in reproducing this amazing creature called man?

A short pause at the moment when a newborn starts its life on earth, separating from its mother and starting its own independent life, allowing its heart and lungs to function and begin life is enough to leave us speechless. It is enough to give us an overwhelming feeling of faith. A similar pause for reflection on the moment when a newborn begins to use its tongue to utter its first sounds, syllables, words and then phrases, indeed reflection on the mechanics of speech, the vocalization through the tongue and the larynx, gives us the feeling that we are looking at a great miracle, one that we tend to take for granted because of its familiarity. Yet on reflection we can appreciate the truth that this great wonder could only have come from God. Indeed every small aspect of the creature that is man is a miracle that leaves us absolutely amazed: "*And in yourselves too: can you not see?*" (Verse 21)

Every individual human being is a world of its own; a mirror reflecting the whole universe in a special and unique image that is not repeated at any moment in history. There is no parallel for any one person in the entire human race, whether in shape, features, mind, faculties, spirit, feelings or even in the way the universe is reflected in that person's mind.

In this divine museum that includes millions of millions of individuals, each one is a unique sample that can never be repeated in the same way as fingerprints are unrepeated throughout human history.

Many of the wonders of the human race are open for all to see: "*And in yourselves too: can you not see?*" (Verse 21) What we see of these wonders point to that which we cannot see. These wonders cannot be listed in a book. Indeed, what we know of them will take volumes to explain and what is unknown to us is much greater than what we know. The Qur'ān does not attempt to enumerate them. It simply uses this touch to alert our hearts to this great divine show, which is presented before our very eyes and minds. Thus we go through our journey on earth reflecting and contemplating, deriving immense pleasure from looking carefully at this wonderful creature that lies within ourselves.

Furthermore, we gain much pleasure from looking carefully at people's faces, features, movements and habits, provided that such a look is cast through the eyes of one who acknowledges his position as a servant of God, taking a round in an exhibition of the greatest Creator's work. How about one who spends a lifetime in such pleasant exercise? With a pointer like this, the Qur'ān creates man anew, giving him a new faculty of perception, a new pleasant life and an enjoyment that is unparalleled by anything else on earth.

It is this level of reflection and contemplation that the Qur'ān wants us to achieve. Faith is what gives our hearts such a treasure and opens for us this superior enjoyment while we are still here on earth.

An Oath to Confirm the Truth

After the two exhibitions of the earth and man, the *sūrah* presents a third from the world above, where our perceptions cannot reach. It is there that our shares of provisions and livelihood are determined: "*And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised.*" (Verse 22)

This is a remarkable touch. The means of livelihood and provisions are all on earth. Man works hard and expects to receive his share as a result of his work. The Qur'ān, however, turns man's attention to the sky, to heaven, to God. It is there that shares are determined. The earth itself, and all its means of provisions, are signs for those who have certainty

of faith, pointing to God so that we ask Him for His bounty. Thus do we get rid of worldly burdens, personal greed and the immediate means of income so that these do not become a barrier preventing us from looking up to God who has created all such means.

Every believer understands this statement properly, realizing that it does not mean that one should abandon one's livelihood. He knows that God has assigned to man the task of building life on earth. He understands that it means that man must not make it the focus of his attention. He should work on earth whilst looking up to heaven. He should use the means of his livelihood, realizing that they are not what brings him his provisions. These provisions are assigned to him in heaven, and what God has promised is certain to be fulfilled. Thus his heart breaks the shackles of the immediate concerns about his livelihood, finding in them signs pointing to their Creator. Man thus revives his bond with heaven while standing firmly on the earth. This is what God wants for man, whom He created from clay, then breathed in him of His own spirit, to make him nobler than most of His creation. Faith is the means that puts man in the best situation, because it returns him to that state of pure nature God gave him, before it was affected by deviation and corruption.

Having touched on these three great signs: the earth, man and heaven, God states an oath by Himself, in His glory, that all this discourse is absolutely true: "*By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, all this is the very truth, just as true as you are endowed with speech.*" (Verse 23) That humans speak is a fact they acknowledge. They entertain no doubt whatsoever about it. Likewise, this discourse is absolutely true. God tells only the absolute truth.

Al-Aṣma'ī, a famous literary figure who lived in the later part of the second century of the Islamic calendar, reports the following anecdote which is quoted by al-Zamakhsharī in his commentary on the Qur'ān, *Al-Kashshāf*. We quote it here as it is interesting and relevant to our discussion.

> I came out of the main mosque in Basrah and I saw a Bedouin riding a young camel. He asked me to which tribe I belonged, and I told him that I was from Asma'. He asked where I had come from

> and I said, 'From a place where the words of the Lord of Grace are recited.' He said: 'Then recite to me.' I began reading the *sūrah* entitled 'The Scattering Winds'. When I read the verse saying, "*And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised,*" he said, 'This is enough.' He immediately slaughtered his she-camel and distributed its meat to all the people around, then he broke his sword and bow, and left. When I subsequently went on pilgrimage with Caliph al-Rashīd and as I was doing *ṭawāf* around the Ka'bah, I heard someone with a sharp voice calling me. I looked around and I saw the Bedouin having grown thinner and paler. He greeted me and asked me to recite to him the same *sūrah* again. When I reached the same verse, he said, 'We have found God's promise to be true.' Then he asked me what came after that verse. I read the next verse, "*By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, all this is the very truth, just as true as you are endowed with speech.*" He cried aloud, 'Limitless is God in His glory! Who has angered the Almighty to make Him swear? They would not believe His words so that He would say an oath!' He repeated this three times and then passed away.[2]

This may or may not be a true story, but it reminds us that this oath by God is awesome. It is an oath by God Himself and by His main attribute, 'the Lord of the heavens and earth', which adds to the certainty of the truth that is the subject of this oath. It is true, and it does not need an oath to make it so.

Abraham and the Angels

So far we have looked at the first part of the *sūrah*. The second part includes brief references to the stories of Abraham, Lot, Moses, the 'Ād Prophet Hud's people, the Thamūd Prophet Ṣāliḥ's people, and Noah's people. This part closely relates to what preceded it in the *sūrah* and to what follows.

> *Have you heard the story of Abraham's honoured guests? They went in to see him and bade him peace. He answered, 'Peace,' [and added*

2. Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, Dār al-Fikr, (n.d.), Vol. 4, p. 17.

to himself] 'These are strangers.' He turned quickly to his household and brought out a fat calf. He placed it before them, saying: 'Will you not eat?' He then became apprehensive of them, but they said: 'Do not be afraid.' They gave him the good news of [the birth of] a son who would be endowed with knowledge. His wife then came in with a loud cry, struck her face, and said: 'A barren old woman!' Replied they: 'Thus will it be. This is what your Lord said. He is the Wise, the All-Knowing.' Said Abraham: 'What is your errand, messengers?' They replied: 'We have been sent to a people lost in sin, to bring down on them stones of clay, marked as from your Lord for those who transgressed all bounds. We brought out such believers as were there; but We did not find there any who had surrendered themselves to Us apart from a single house. We left there a sign for those who fear the grievous suffering. (Verses 24–37)

These verses speak of a sign or signs in the history of the divine message, just like those signs in the earth and in man to which the *sūrah* referred. It also refers to a promise or promises that are fulfilled, just like the promises the *sūrah* mentioned earlier.

It begins its reference to Abraham by the question: "*Have you heard the story of Abraham's honoured guests?*" (Verse 24) This style is used to prepare our minds for what comes next. It describes Abraham's guests as '*honoured*', either because they are so in God's sight, or because of how Abraham paid honour to them as we soon learn. Abraham's hospitality appears very clearly from the first moment his guests arrived. Once they greeted him and received his reply, and despite the fact that they are total strangers, he immediately goes to his wife telling her to prepare food. He provides a large quantity of food, sufficient for scores of people: "*He turned quickly to his household and brought out a fat calf.*" (Verse 26) According to some reports, there were only three guests, which means that a shoulder of that calf would have been sufficient to give them a good meal.

"*He placed it before them, saying: 'Will you not eat?'*" (Verse 27) He asked this question after he saw that their hands did not touch the food and it looked as if they would not eat the meal that had been provided.

"*He then became apprehensive of them,*" either because a stranger who refuses to eat his host's food appears treacherous and causes an element of apprehension, or because he noticed something odd about them. Therefore, they revealed their identity, reassuring him and giving him the good news they had brought him: "*They said: 'Do not be afraid.' They gave him the good news of [the birth of] a son who would be endowed with knowledge.*" (Verse 28) This was the happy news of Isaac's birth.

"*His wife then came in with a loud cry, struck her face, and said: 'A barren old woman!'*" (Verse 29) She overheard the good news, was stunned and surprised. She could not stop herself from crying out in amazement. In the habitual reaction of women, she slapped herself on both cheeks and said: '*A barren old woman!*' This was a further expression of her surprise given she was elderly, and had been barren throughout her life. Stunned by this totally unexpected piece of news, she forgot that those bringing the good news were angels. Therefore, the angels reminded her of the basic truth that there is no limit to God's power, and that He determines everything on the basis of perfect wisdom and absolute knowledge: "*Replied they: 'Thus will it be. This is what your Lord said. He is the Wise, the All-Knowing.'*" (Verse 30)

Everything will come into existence once the command, 'Be', is given. God said it, so what can prevent His order from being fulfilled? Familiar habits limit our imagination and understanding. Therefore, we are surprised when we see something running counter to what is familiar. Yet God's will is free, unrestricted by anything that may be familiar to man in his small world. It creates whatever He wills, without limitation.

When Abraham realized who his guests were, he asked them about the mission they had been sent to accomplish: "*Said Abraham: 'What is your errand, messengers?' They replied: 'We have been sent to a people lost in sin.*" (Verses 31–32) These were Lot's people as explained in other *sūrahs*. Those angels would "*bring down on them stones of clay, marked as from your Lord for those who transgressed all bounds.*" (Verses 33–34)

These stones of clay, marked or made ready by God for those who transgress the bounds, like Lot's people who transgressed the bounds of human nature, truth and religion, may well be stones from a volcanic eruption brought out from deep inside the earth. In this respect, they

are '*from your Lord,*' aimed, in accordance with His will and the laws He sets in operation, against any transgressors He has marked. Thus, they are determined in time and place according to His absolute knowledge and His will. There is nothing to prevent their being aimed, within the framework of His will and laws, by angels. Do we know the exact nature of God's angels? Do we know the nature of their relation to the universe and its inhabitants? Do we truly know the nature of the universal powers to which we give names according to what we may see of their characteristics? Why should we question the news given to us by God, saying that He sent some of these forces at a certain point of time, to aim some powers in a particular form, against certain people, at a certain place? How can we question such news when all our knowledge consists of some theories and supposed interpretations concerning what appears to us of these powers and forces? Their reality remains far removed from us. Let these stones be volcanic resulting from an eruption nearby, or some other such stones. What difference does it make? Both are the same in His hand, as He has made both and the secret is known to Him. He may reveal that secret when and if He so wishes.

"*We brought out such believers as were there,*" to protect and save them. "*But We did not find there any who had surrendered themselves to Us apart from a single house.*" (Verse 36) Those were Lot's family, as reported in other *sūrahs*, and they were all saved except his wife who perished with her people. "*We left there a sign for those who fear the grievous suffering.*" (Verse 37) Those who fear are the ones who see the sign, understand it and benefit from it. The others are blind, unable to see God's signs on earth, within themselves or in the events of history.

Moses and Earlier Communities

Another sign is cited from the history of Moses. A brief reference to this is made within the context of the signs from the history of God's messengers:

> *In Moses, too, there is a sign: We sent him to Pharaoh with clear authority; but Pharaoh turned away in the pride of his power and*

> *said [of Moses]: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' We seized him and his hosts, and cast them all into the sea: he was the one to blame.* (Verses 38–40)

The clear authority God gave to Moses was his powerful argument and irrefutable proof, as well as that people were in awe of his presence. Yet Pharaoh turned away, proud of his power, and rejected the clear truth and the decisive proof. When Moses showed him the miraculous signs God had given him, Pharaoh said that Moses was '*a sorcerer or a madman*'. This confirms that miracles will not guide a heart that is not prepared to believe. They cannot silence a voice that insists on repeating fabrications.

The *sūrah* does not give details of Moses' story. It proceeds straight to its conclusion: "*We seized him and his hosts, and cast them all into the sea: he was the one to blame.*" (Verse 40) Pharaoh certainly deserved all blame because of his transgression and rejection of God's message. The phraseology here clearly indicates God's direct action in seizing Pharaoh and his army and casting them into the sea. This is deliberately highlighted as it fits with the exhibition of God's signs on earth, in man and throughout history.

> *In the 'Ād there is another sign: We let loose against them a life-destroying wind which reduced to dust everything it came upon.* (Verses 41–42)

The wind is described in Arabic as *'aqīm*, which literally means 'sterile'. It is given this description because, unlike what they expected, it did not bring them water and life. Rather, it destroyed life and brought about death and total destruction. It left everything it came upon like a dead thing, reduced to dust.

Wind is one of the forces God has set in the universe, and one of God's troops which are known only to Him. He sends it, in accordance with His will and the laws He sets in operation, in a particular form, at an appointed time, bringing either destruction or life to whomever He wills. In such a situation there is no room for the naïve objection

voiced by some people who say that the wind blows according to a universal system and travels here or there as other natural forces and factors determine. The One who makes it blow and travel according to a certain system, forces and factors is the One who sends it against whom He wills at the time He chooses. He is able to send it as He wills within the system and factors He has put in place. No doubt or objection can be voiced.

> *And in Thamūd, too, when they were told: 'You can enjoy your life for a while,' but they insolently defied their Lord's commandment. So, the thunderbolt struck them while they were helplessly looking on. They were unable even to rise; nor could they defend themselves.* (Verses 43–45)

The statement referring to what was said to them, "*You can enjoy your life for a while*," may be a reference to their being given a period of three days after they killed the she-camel, which was a sign given to them by God. This is mentioned in another *sūrah*, when their prophet, Ṣālih, said to them: "*You have just three more days to enjoy life in your homes.*" (11: 65) It could also refer to the fact that they had their time of life and enjoyed it from the time the divine message was given to them to the time when they slew the she-camel. They clearly disobeyed God and deserved His punishment.

What was said about the stones aimed at Lot's people and the wind sent against the 'Ād is also applicable to the thunderbolt that struck the Thamūd. All of these are universal forces that work in accordance with God's will and His laws. He sends them against whomever He decides within these laws and they fulfil the role assigned to them by God like any of His other troops.

"*And the people of Noah before them: they too were people lost in evil.*" (Verse 46) This is just a quick reference, with no details or explanations. It is added as if to say, 'remember Noah's people.' This reference is followed by one to the skies and how they are built. Both are among God's signs, one from the universe and one from history. The *sūrah* puts them together, so joining its second and third parts.

Creatures in Pairs

> *We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse; and We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it! All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought. Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning; and do not associate partners with Him: I am sent by Him to give you clear warning!* (Verses 47–51)

These verses take us back to the great universal exhibition the *sūrah* presented in its opening, providing here yet another image the Qur'ān puts before our eyes and minds. Further references are added to God's signs, linking that provided by Noah and his people with that of the heavens, the earth and other creatures. This culminates with a call to mankind to flee to their Lord, submitting themselves to Him and associating no partners with Him.

"*We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse.*" (Verse 47) Power is the clearest element in the solid, firm and well-coordinated structure of the '*skies*', whatever we take the term to mean: the orbits of the different stars and planets, any of the star clusters we normally call a galaxy which includes many millions of stars, a stratum of the huge space in which planets and stars are scattered, or any other of its many meanings. Vastness is another clearly recognizable element. These millions of huge stars are no more than small particles floating in the great expanse that is the universe.

This reference to the skies may also imply a pointer to the stores of sustenance, which were stated earlier in the *sūrah* to be in the sky. However, in the earlier reference it is merely a symbol indicating what is with God. Yet the Qur'ānic expression gives deliberate connotations so as to leave a clear impression on people's minds.

The same applies to the reference to the earth and its being spread out: "*And We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it!*" (Verse 48) As we explained before, God has made this earth to be a cradle for human life. That the earth has been spread out indicates that it serves as a cradle equipped with all that is necessary to support and enable life to flourish.

"*All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought.*" (Verse 49) This is a fascinating truth that reveals the basic rule common to all creation on earth, and possibly in the universe. As it stands, the statement does not limit the '*in pairs*' rule to the earth. It is clearly seen among living creatures, but the phrase, '*all things*', also includes inanimate objects. Hence, the statement means that both animate and inanimate things are created in pairs.

This statement was presented to people 14 centuries ago, when even the thought that living things, let alone inanimate objects, are all made in pairs was totally unknown. When we remember this we find the statement itself becomes amazing, as it presents such a universal fact to people at such an early time. Moreover, this statement confirms that recent scientific research is heading towards confirmation of this truth. Indeed, it has almost established that the whole universe is made of atoms, which contain a dual electric charge, positive and negative.[3]

These verses referring to the great universe, the width of the earth and the system of creation all culminate in a call on people to flee to God, the Creator of all, shedding all that shackles their souls, acknowledging His absolute unity: "*Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning; and do not associate partners with Him: I am sent by Him to give you clear warning!*" (Verses 50–51) Use of the word *flee*, here is very significant. It points to the burdens, shackles and handcuffs that restrain people, pulling them towards the earth and its material life, preventing free movement and ensuring they are always restrained. Most cogent among these are the restraints of earning one's livelihood, maintaining one's income and preoccupation with improving one's lot. Therefore, the call to shed all these and flee to God, alone, without partners, is very powerful. It reminds people, twice in succession, that they have no excuse for not doing so: "*I am sent by Him to give you clear warning.*" (Verses 50–51)

It is as if the mention of the signs seen everywhere in the heavens, earth and among creatures is a continuation of the signs given to God's

3. The author wrote this in the late 1950s Recent scientific research has moved further, looking at sub-atomic particles, the string theory, etc. These again confirm what is stated here that every thing is created in pairs. God certainly tells the truth. – Editor's note.

messengers. Next we have a comment on the references to earlier messengers mentioned in the *sūrah*:

> *Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' Have they, perchance, handed down this legacy to one another? No! They are people who transgress all bounds. Turn, then, away from them: you shall incur no blame; and go on reminding all. Such a reminder will benefit those who believe.* (Verses 52–55)

It is the same nature common to all unbelievers. They all give the same response to the divine message: "*Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.'*" (Verse 52) This is exactly what the Arab unbelievers said. It is as if one generation of unbelievers handed down such a legacy to the next in a continuing process. Needless to say, there was no such handing down. It is all in the nature of transgression and unbelief whereby present unbelievers and their predecessors are brought together.

The natural result of this repeated stand is that the Prophet should not pay any attention to what the unbelievers say. He is not responsible for them as they choose to remain in error. He has spared no effort in trying to get them to follow divine guidance: "*Turn, then, away from them: you shall incur no blame.*" (Verse 54) His only task is to remind people and to continue to give them reminders, no matter how persistent they are in their rejection of the truth: "*And go on reminding all. Such a reminder will benefit those who believe.*" (Verse 55) Such reminders will not benefit hardened unbelievers. Yet the task assigned to God's messengers is to give such reminders. It is not within their ability to ensure that people follow proper guidance. That is outside their remit. It is God alone who gives guidance.

The Purpose of Creation

The last note in the *sūrah* explains the meaning of fleeing to God and shedding all burdens and encumbrances in order to fulfil the mission for which He created people:

> *I have not created the* jinn *and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me. No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty.* (Verses 56–58)

This short statement embodies one of the greatest universal truths. Indeed, to fully understand this truth it is necessary for human life on earth to be set on the right track. This applies in equal measure to the life of the individual, the community and all humanity throughout history. Understanding this truth opens up a whole host of concepts and meanings. The first point in this truth is that there is a clear objective for the existence of humans and *jinn* on earth. This objective is represented in a task: whoever fulfils it achieves the objective of his existence, and whoever neglects it leads a life without purpose or objective. He who neglects it thus breaks away from the law that applied to him when he came into existence, and he ends in utter loss. This task which binds humans and *jinn* to the law of the universe is worship or servitude to God. Thus, there will be a servant who worships and a Lord who is worshipped. Man's life is thus set aright on this basis.

We then begin to see the other side of this great truth, realizing that the concept of worship must be much broader and more comprehensive than attending to worship rituals. Neither humans nor *jinn* spend their lives in worship rituals. Indeed, God does not require them to do so. On the contrary, He requires them to fulfil other tasks which take up most of their time. We do not know anything about the sort of duties God requires of the *jinn*, but we know the extent of what God requires of man. This is clearly stated in the Qur'ān, as God says: "*Your Lord said to the angels, 'I am appointing a vicegerent on earth.'*" (2: 30) Being in charge of the earth is then the main function of human beings. This requires the exercise of different activities and the use of different talents in order to build human life on earth, after getting to know its resources and potentials. In doing so, man puts in effect God's will to use and develop the earth so as to ensure steady progress. Man's vicegerency also involves the implementation of God's law so that human society can be set on the proper foundation, one that is in harmony with the law governing the universe.

All this makes it absolutely clear that worship, which is the objective of human existence, or rather man's first duty, has a much broader sense than the mere observance of rituals. Indeed the entire concept of vicegerency is incorporated into the idea of worship, which must be reflected in two major ways. The first is that the concept of man's servitude to God should be well established in our hearts. This so that we fully realize that there is only a servant who worships and a Lord who is worshipped. Beyond this there is nothing: it is just the One Lord and all others are His servants, to whom they offer their worship. The second is that every thought, every action and every life affair must be addressed purely to God, seeking His acceptance. Every feeling other than that of submission to God and worshipping Him should be discarded.

When these two concepts are fully absorbed, the meaning of worship is fully realized. Thus, ordinary actions in man's life become like worship rituals; rituals like building human life on earth, striving for God's cause, ensuring patience in adversity and accepting God's will are all aspects of worship, fulfilling the main objective for which humans and *jinn* have been created. They are all a translation of submission to the overall law that governs the universe, which is submission and servitude to God, and to no one else.

Thus man will live on earth feeling that he is there to fulfil a task assigned to him by God, for a period of time. This task is to obey God and worship Him, without having any interest or objective in all this other than obedience of God. The reward for such obedience man finds within himself in the form of pleasant reassurance and satisfaction with his lot, as well as deep gratification from earning God's acceptance. He will then find greater reward in the life to come where he will receive honour and far-reaching blessings.

He will then have truly fled to God, discarding all worldly burdens, attractions and distractions and claimed his full freedom. He will have established his position in the general system of the universe as a servant of God who created him for His worship. He will have fulfilled the purpose of his existence. As we have said: an essential requirement of worship, in its proper and full sense, is that man should fulfil the duties of his position that places him in charge of the earth. He should achieve the best results he can in discharging his duties, while at the same

time look for no personal benefit. No worldly attraction should tempt him to change course. What he must realize is that when he fulfils his mission of building human life on earth, to the best standard he can, he is not doing so for himself or his position; he is doing it in order to put into effect the concept of worship and to flee to God from all worldly burdens and attractions.

A correlative of this is that man should evaluate deeds and actions on the basis of their motives, not their results. Let the outcome be as it may, man should not concern himself with it. He is only concerned with fulfilling his duty of worship when he does anything. His reward is not based on the outcome of his actions, but on the worship he fulfils in performing them.

This means that man's attitude to duties, responsibilities and actions will totally change. He will look only to the worship aspect involved in them all. When he fulfils this aspect, his objective is met, let the outcome be what it may. The outcome is not part of his responsibility. It is determined by God's will. Man himself, his efforts, intentions and actions are part of God's will.

When man offloads any concern about the outcome of his efforts and feels that his reward is guaranteed, as long as his motive for action fulfils the concept of worship, his heart will be free of the sort of aspirations that make people compete and quarrel over life's prizes. On the one side, he exerts his best efforts to fulfil his mission and discharge his duties on earth, and, on the other, he looks for no gain as a result of his efforts. What he achieves is solely to fulfil the concept of worship, not to make any personal gain.

The Qur'ān strengthens this feeling, letting man overcome his concerns about his livelihood and his selfish desires. Everybody's livelihood is guaranteed by God. Needless to say, He needs neither sustenance nor food from them when He asks them to spend some of their money on those who are in need: "*No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty.*" (Verses 57–58) What this means in effect is that a believer's incentive to work and exert his best efforts in discharging his duties of building human life on earth is not to earn a livelihood; his incentive is to fulfil the meaning of worship,

which requires him to exert his best efforts. Thus his mind is focused on the fulfilment of the worship concept in doing whatever he is doing. He is free of concerns about the results of this effort. These are, then, noble feelings, which can only exist within such a noble concept.

It is true that humanity does not understand or appreciate these feelings. This is because humanity has not lived with the guidance of the Qur'ān, as the first generation of Muslims did, nor has it derived its life value from the Islamic constitution.

When man rises to this sublime level of worship, or servitude to God, and maintains it, he will disdain any resort to foul means in order to achieve a noble end, even when this end is none other than to achieve victory for God's message. Foul means will, for one thing, destroy the noble meaning of worship. For another, a believer is not concerned with achieving goals. He is only concerned with the fulfilment of his duty. Goals and ends are left to God to determine in accordance with His will.

Moreover, a servant of God who attends to his worship in this way will enjoy ease of conscience, reassurance and a happy state in all situations, whether he sees the outcome of his efforts or not, and whether they bring the results he hoped for or not. He has done his duty and made sure of his reward once he has fulfilled the concept of worship in his work. The outcome is outside his remit. He knows that he is a servant of God. Therefore, in his feelings and appeals, he does not exceed the limits of a servant. He knows that God is the Lord. Therefore, he does not encroach on what belongs to the Lord. He thus earns God's acceptance and He is happy with what God gives him.

Thus do we understand some aspects of this great truth stated in a single short verse: "*I have not created the* jinn *and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me.*" (Verse 56) This truth is great indeed; it can change how people live when it takes hold of their hearts.

In the light of this great truth, the *sūrah* concludes with a warning to the wrongdoers who hasten the fulfilment of God's warnings: "*The wrongdoers shall have their share [of evil] like their predecessors. Let them not ask Me to hasten it. Woe betide the unbelievers on the day they have been promised.*" (Verses 59–60)